
UNIT 13 RABINDRANATH TAGORE

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13.1 INTRODUCTION

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was an outstanding literary figure of India who exerted considerable influence on human thinking in the contemporary world. This influence extended to the political arena as well by his lucid elucidation of important concepts like nationalism, freedom, human rationality and his many differences with Mahatma Gandhi's (1869-1948) philosophy and strategies.

While Gandhi was a political and social activist and Tagore was a poet, there was remarkable consistency in the enunciation of their major political themes, which they developed and refined reflecting on major events of their time. Furthermore, in Tagore there was a quest of a poet for human perfection and completeness and not merely a pragmatic analysis of a particular problem or a situation. His expression was an eloquent appeal of his faith in the human spirit and the optimism by which the entire humankind could think of realising freedom, breaking all artificial barriers, which had been built over the years. These barriers built on prejudices and hatred were the stumbling blocs in the way of achieving the ultimate aim of a beautiful and harmonious world for all paving the way for human perfection with flowering of human creativity and with triumph of human dignity. The modern Indian political tradition of assimilating the Western ideas with the Eastern ones, which began with Rammohan Roy, reached its culmination in Tagore.

13.2 THEORY OF FREEDOM AND SELF-REALISATION

A specific Indian idea of freedom that started to evolve with Rammohan, was articulated subsequently by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), Aurobindo Ghosh (1872-1950), Gandhi and Tagore. Rammohan wanted to synthesise Indian and Western ideas with an unflinching commitment to his own tradition. Vivekananda like Rammohan was rooted in the Indian tradition. Aurobindo, Gandhi and Tagore reiterated his emphasis on harmony without losing sight of one's identity and culture.

For Tagore, freedom was not merely political emancipation but the mingling of the individual

with the universe depicted in his song- my freedom *is in this air, in the sky and in this light of universe*. The goal of freedom lay in making one perfect. He significantly remarked that many nations and people were powerful but not free because realisation of freedom was something very different from merely using coercive power. It was the condition and attitude of life in which one might wish to develop his best. The human being as a part of this great universe could enjoy real freedom only when he could harmonise his relations with the world. It is a bond of unity where power leads to disunity.

Tagore's notion of freedom was influenced by Expressionism (1910-24) and political theorists of the early Twentieth century like Ernest Barker, Mary Follet and Harold Laski who vigorously pleaded for a plural society as a basic precondition for the successful functioning of democracy. He shared with Eliot the idea of the modern society as mechanical and hollow thwarting the creative human spirit and energies. He desired a freedom that would enable a human being to realise his ideas and aspirations as it found expression in different types of creative art with the help of reason and scientific outlook and by allowing the potentialities of industrialisation towards human liberation.

Tagore guided by the *Upanishadic* doctrine of *Satyam, Sivam and Advaitam* (truth, of goodness and unity) was utterly dissatisfied with the philosophy of glorification and expansionism pursued by powerful nations for that thwarted human creativity. This was evident in his two symbolic works *Raktakorabi* and *Muktadhara*. However, like Russell, he continued to retain his faith in the human being as evident from his *Russian Chithi* and *Africa* with its clear preference for socialism, democracy, freedom and social justice that transcended national boundaries and races.

For Tagore, freedom of the individual was the basis or the growth of human civilisation and progress. It was the inner urge of a person to be in harmony with the great universe. Freedom was everything creative and spontaneous in human mind and spirit. It was the capacity to create a better order. Tagore was against unquestioned conformity which he described as "the state of slavery which is thus brought on is the worst form of cancer to which humanity is subject". As a believer in individual action he rejected the claim of finality of any action and insisted that there were many paths to individual salvation and moral progress. He conceived of history as the gradual unfolding and realisation of absolute truth and through it the individual revelation and fulfilment and in the end the emergence of the truly free and content human being. He remarked to Einstein that his religion was the religion of man. His was quest for the eternal and it is due to such generous and humane ideas that civilisation assumes meaning.

Tagore, like the early Indian liberals considered the real problem of India as social and not political. A narrow vision of political liberty would grossly be inadequate in establishing a good society for that would deny individual's moral and spiritual freedom. He castigated even the free independent countries being a reflection of this narrow view. Mere political freedom could not make one free, as cleavages and weaknesses of society would pose a danger to politics. Without creating confidence in the average person, he would always feel inferior and "the tyranny of injustice" would perpetuate. It was in this emphasis of comprehending the essential basis of realising freedom by broadening the base through inculcating a sense of identity and pride in every single individual in the world that Tagore's conception departed from other popular political theories of freedom which focuses more on the abstract individual.

13.3 EMPHASIS ON HUMAN REASON

In *Sabhyatar Sankat* or *Crisis in Civilisation* (1941) he mentioned his admiration of the humanistic tradition of English literature, which formed the basis of his faith in modern civilisation. He admitted that India's link with the outside world was established with the arrival of the British and cited Burke, Macaulay, Shakespeare and Byron as those who inspired and generated a confidence in the triumph of the human being. Indians aspired for independence but believed in English generosity and the British character, which reflected their philosophy of universal fellowship. Like other contemporary Indian thinkers, Tagore also believed that India benefitted from her contact with the West in general and Britain in particular. He considered the British victory over India as the victory of modernity. The right to freedom in a modern world is a basic human right.

Tagore not only mentioned how as a young person he was immensely influenced by John Bright but also the pain he felt at the denial to Indians the industrial power that made Great Britain a world power. He also pointed out to the lack of modernity and absence of scientific temper in India, a void filled by coming into contact with the West thereby making the nineteenth century an age of co-operation with Europe. However Europe in the twentieth century failed by its own criterion for it was unable to transmit its basic civilisation traits to others. In this context he provided an interesting contrast between the nature and purpose of the British rule with that of the Soviet rule, the two powers that administered a number of divergent races. Britain by its rule had made the subject races docile whereas the Soviets were trying to make them strong. India experienced the strength of the West but not its liberating power. The British official policy was in sharp contrast to outstanding individuals like C.F. Andrews that Britain produced, which was an unparalleled feat, and one that reinforced his faith in humanity and in the ultimate triumph of human reason and freedom (Tagore 1961: 414).

13.4 CRITIQUE OF NATIONALISM

Tagore's perception of the dual role, one positive, "the spirit of the West" and the other negative, "the nation of the West" was the starting point of his analysis of nationalism as it developed in the West (Tagore, 1976: 11). He paid glowing tributes to the achievements of the West in the field of literature and art which he described as "titanic in its uniting power...sweeping the height and the depth of the universe" and also mentioned the presence of outstanding individuals fighting for the cause of humanity. However, behind this beneficence also lay the malefic aspect, "using all her power of greatness for ends, which are against the infinite and eternal in Man" (Tagore *ibid*: 39-40). He attributed this contradiction to the malady of the nation-state. The nation, which represented the organised self-interest of a whole people, was also the "least human and least spiritual" and the biggest evil in the contemporary world. It built a "civilisation of power" (Tagore *ibid*: 8) which made it exclusive, vain and proud. One form of its manifestation was the colonisation of people and subjecting them to exploitation and suffering. In this context Tagore cited the example of Japan-which had secured the benefits of Western civilisation to the maximum possible extent without getting dominated by the West. He considered the nation to be nothing else than an "organisation of politics and commerce" (Tagore *ibid*: 7). Its emphasis on success made it a machine that stifled harmony in social life and eclipsing the end of good life, namely the individual, He

mentioned the anarchists who opposed any form of imposition of power over the individual. He rejected the philosophy of a balance of terror on the premise that man's world was a moral one. He denounced communal sectarianism and nationalism and criticised abstract cosmopolitanism. Berlin (1977: 65) wrote:

“Tagore stood fast on the narrow causeway, and did not betray his vision of the difficult truth. We condemned romantic overattachment to the past, what he called the tying of India to the past "like a sacrificial goat tethered to a post", and he accused men who displayed it – they seemed to him reactionary- of not knowing what true political freedom was, pointing out that it is from English thinkers and English books that the very notion of political liberty was derived. But against cosmopolitanism he maintained that the English stood on their own feet, and so must Indians. In 1917 he once more denounced the danger of "leaving everything to the unalterable will of the Master," be he brahmin or Englishman”.

Tagore saw very clearly two clear-cut alternatives to the present scenario: one to continue to fight amongst one another and second, to locate the "true basis of reconciliation and mutual help" (Tagore *ibid*: 60). This strong denunciation of nationalism was surely hastened by the First World War. In *what is a Nation?* (1901), he analysed Renan's (1823-1892) views and categorically declared imperialism as the logical culmination of a nation and that race, language, commercial interests, religious unity and geographical location did not constitute the human essence. In the early years of the twentieth century he noted the dangers of narrow religious beliefs and aggressive nationalism at the expense of liberalism and offered universalism as an effective substitute, reflected in many of his later writings including the *Gitanjali*.

Tagore wrote of the European dominance of Asia and Africa while dissecting the causes of the First World War. The root cause of the War was the German scramble for colonies and division of the world into the ruler and the ruled. He aptly remarked that when such philosophy was propounded outside Europe, the Europeans did not understand its bitterness but when they were at the receiving end they felt the pinch. Germany's action at that time was not a unique one but a part of the history of European civilisation. He also prophesied correctly that the First World War would not be the last one and that another war was inevitable.

The immediate reception of Tagore's criticisms of nationalism was a mixed one. The American Press was hostile. *The Detroit Journal* warned the people against "such sickly saccharine mental poison with which Tagore would corrupt the minds of the youth of our great United States" (cited in Kripalani 1961: 139). Within India some of his contemporaries took exception to his remarks. For instance, some members of the *Ghadar* Party mistook his criticisms "as betrayal of Indian nationalist aspirations" (cited in Kripalani *ibid*: 139). They thought that Tagore, who was knighted by the British a year ago, was a British agent and was sent to the United States to discredit India. In Japan, initially he received great ovation as poet-seer from the land of the Buddha. But when in his lectures he warned them against imitating the lust for power of the Western civilisation as well as its worship of the nation state he was virulently criticised. When he cautioned Japan to follow only the humane values of the West his popularity declined (cited in Kripalani *ibid*: 139). However, a small number of Japanese intelligentsia became aware of the significance of Tagore's plank. After the war, it came to be known that typed copies of Tagore's *Nationalism* were distributed amongst soldiers on the Western front. There were speculations that this was the work of the European pacifists.

A British soldier Max Plomann admitted after the war that he left the army forever in 1917 after reading Tagore's work. Rolland in a letter dated August 26th 1919 expressed views similar to that of Tagore's.

Tagore characterised the modern age as European because of Europe's leadership in innovation, science and technology and emphasis on reason. But he was equally conscious of its weaknesses namely arrogance of power, exploitative and dominating nature and desire for supremacy. Though the time and context of Tagore formulations has drastically changed, his concerns, namely non-acceptance of Euro-centrism and its inability to transmit basic traits of a universal civilisation remain valid even today.

13.5 DIFFERENCES WITH GANDHI

The essence of Gandhi's entire political philosophy is in the *Hind Swaraj* (1908) and Tagore's in *Swadeshi Samaj* (1904). Both of them had a great deal of respect and reverence for one another, though this mutual respect did not prohibit them from expressing basic disagreements about their respective perceptions of contemporary reality and the desired nature of the movements in the given Indian situation. A major controversy erupted between them following Gandhi's return to India from South Africa and his meteoric rise in Indian politics culminating in the non co-operation movement and Tagore's articulation of a philosophy of universalism and his criticism of the cult of nationalism during the First World War.

Tagore regarded India's basic problem to be social and not political, though like Gandhi, he was conscious of the acute differences and conflicts in the Indian society. As such society and not politics was his primary area of focus. He could perceive that the triumph of science had united the whole country into one, which made possible for seeking a unity that was not political. This perception led him to conclude that India could offer a solution in this regard for she "never had a real sense of nationalism" (Tagore *ibid*: 64). Regarding the nationalist upsurge he was convinced that it would popularise the struggle for independence but would be unproductive in the overall context of its own development for the quest of freedom would imperil its realisation.

Tagore developed this argument after a careful scrutiny of the Gandhian leadership and strategy. He derived the basic framework of this evaluation from his earlier experiences during the days of agitation against Bengal partition of 1905. In that movement, initially Tagore took an active part popularising *Raksha Bandhan* and nationalistic songs. It was immediately during the period after the publication of *Swadeshi Samaj* that he passionately pleaded for the revitalisation of the decaying villages and creation of new awareness amongst the ordinary people. Though initially he was in the forefront of the movement, he became disillusioned since he could very clearly see that there was no concern about the need for mass awareness and that the city-based middle class were keen on protecting its own selfish interests. After withdrawing from the movement he made serious attempts to rebuild the village life within the Zamindari system, the then prevailing system. This background is important for comprehending his basic disagreements with Gandhi.

Tagore's first written evidence about Gandhi's preferences and policies were in a letter written on 12th April 1919 from *Shantiniketan* advising Gandhi to be cautious about the programme of non co-operation for in no way did it represent India's moral superiority. He

took note of the important changes that came with the rise of Gandhi in Indian politics. He thought very highly of Gandhi's leadership and could also see that the proposed non-cooperation movement would engulf the whole country and would be much bigger than the anti-partition movement of Bengal. He could also grasp the important difference between the present phase and the earlier ones. Earlier the political leaders did not look beyond the English educated people, whereas in contrast, Gandhi emerged as the spokesperson of millions of poor illiterate Indians. He spoke their language and wore their dress. Though his precepts were practical and not bookish they lacked logic and scientific reasoning. They did not contain a philosophy for awakening the nation. Instead of following the path of truth Gandhi attempted a shortcut by taking the easy path.

Subsequently he was perturbed by the fact that everyone talked in the same voice and made the same gestures and characterised this development as symbolising the worst manifestations of nationalism for it indicated a slavish mentality and had nothing to do with the alien rule. What he resented most was the fact that the Gandhian directives, which included manual spinning of yarn and burning of foreign cloth, were medieval in nature. None of these stipulations were dissected critically and were accepted as dogmas. The Gandhian directives were followed mechanically and not rationally. Moreover the emphasis on simplicity would retard economic advancement for the narrow form of *swadeshi* would only result in restrictive provincial attitude, isolationism and provoke unnecessary hostility in the rest of the world. Gandhi's plans would lead to India's isolation preventing western knowledge and advancements from reaching India.

Disagreeing with Gandhi, Tagore pointed out that it was not possible to estimate the exact magnitude of idle time among the middle class and that peasants who constituted eighty-percent of the Indian population without a meaningful occupation for six months in a year. He wondered whether it was desirable to popularise the use of the spinning wheel. Instead he preferred constructive programmes like co-operative agriculture for that would eliminate the malaise of small unproductive holdings and fight poverty. He felt that popularising a scientific concept like co-operative agriculture would be more important than any political action. He thought it was wrong of Gandhi to instruct Indian women to stop reading English and also opposed Gandhi's call for boycott of government schools. Though critical of the existing system he felt that in the absence of a better alternative it would only result in perpetuating ignorance, superstitions and backwardness. In 1928 Tagore criticised Gandhi's defence of *varnashrama* by arguing that the system was inefficient as the occupation follows birth and not individual capacity. Hereditary occupation was mechanical, repetitive, obstructed innovation and retarded human freedom. He lamented that a true *kshatriya* was conspicuous by its absence in India. Similarly he dismissed Gandhi's blame on untouchability as the cause of the Bihar earthquake on 5th February 1934, as unscientific, unreasonable and that it failed to explain the fact as to why the poor and the lower castes suffered more than the privileged and upper castes. On 20th May 1939 in a letter to the Congress he warned against the worship of power within the Congress when some of Gandhi's followers compared Gandhi to Mussolini and Hitler thus insulting Gandhi before the entire world. As a desired alternative, Tagore pleaded for "universal humanity and gave a call for recognising the vast dimensions of India in its world context" because "henceforth any nation which seeks isolation for itself must come into conflict with the time-spirit and find no peace. From now onwards the thinking of every nation will have to be international. It is the striving of the new age to develop in the mind this faculty of universality" (cited in Dalton 1982: 202).

In response to these charges Gandhi replied that "Indian nationalism is not exclusive, nor aggressive, nor destructive. It is health-giving, religious and therefore humanitarian". He defended the use of the spinning wheel for that was the only way to 'realise the essential and living one-ness of interest among India's myriads'. Its purpose was to symbolise "sacrifice for the whole nation". To the charges of narrow provincialism and dangers of his kind of nationalism he pointed out: "I hope I am as great a believer in free air as the great poet. I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any". Furthermore, Gandhi did not regard his patriotism to be exclusive; "it is calculated not only to hurt any other nation but to benefit all in the true sense of the word. India's freedom as conceived by me can never be a menace to the world" (cited in Dalton *ibid*: 202-03). Tagore too shared the same attitude toward cultural diversity but was more cautious than Gandhi for his perception of the possible decay and degeneration as he saw in the later developments at the time of the partition of Bengal in 1905.

Rolland characterised Tagore's revolt against Gandhi as "the revolt of the free soul" (1976: 64). C.F. Andrews expressed similar views about Tagore. Nehru wrote in 1961 "Tagore's article *The Call of Truth* and Gandhi's reply in his weekly *Young India* which he called 'The Great Sentinel' made wonderful reading. They represent two aspects of the truth, neither of which could be ignored" (Dalton *ibid*: 204). Tagore's role was that of a critical but sympathetic observer of the nationalist upsurge in India, which he wanted to be based both on reason and a concern for the masses. He criticised Gandhi whenever he felt that the Mahatma was deviating from these planks. He not only criticised but also provided an alternative perception to that of Gandhi. He acknowledges his greatness and lauded his role in fighting casteism, untouchability and communalism but was equally forthright in pointing out the limitations of the Gandhian schemes. For instance he criticised Mahatma's basic education scheme of 1937 popularly known as the *Wardha Scheme* on two grounds. First, he questioned the desirability of the precedence of material utility over development of personality. Second, the scheme of a special type of education for the rural poor would limit the choice of their vocation and that it is "unfortunate that even in our ideal scheme education should be doled out in insufficient rations to the poor". He identified the lack of basic education as the fundamental cause of many of India's social and economic afflictions and desired lively and enjoyable schools.

Tagore had the courage of conviction to point out the inadequacies of Mahatma's vision. Since some of his criticisms are well founded, it is time to work out a synthesis with the experience of last five decades particularly in the major areas of our shortcomings like rural reconstruction, education and provide the requisite incentive for the rural poor to lead a decent and dignified life.

13.6 ANALYSIS OF BOLSHEVISM

Tagore visited Europe and the United States several times but he went to the USSR only once when he was seventy years old and considered the trip a pilgrimage and felt that had he not gone his life would have remained incomplete. The trip was for two weeks only and he could not go anywhere else except to be in Moscow. The *Letters from Russia* expressed his recollections of the Soviet Union. It is not a travelogue but a reflective account of what he saw and what he liked and disliked. Most of the letters were written after he left the

Soviet Union. Before going there, an interesting incident took place in Tokyo, where a young man from Korea entered into a conversation with Tagore which the latter recorded himself. The questions and answers revolved around the emergence of the new Soviet society. In this conversation, the Korean emphasised on the question of the animosity between the rich and the poor and the inevitability of the revolution. After a few months of this conversation, Tagore went to the Soviet Union. He was not as overwhelmed as the Korean young man as he had serious doubts about the new culture being propagated by the new socialist regime. He praised the Soviet efforts of creating a new society giving rights to ordinary people and for starting collective enterprises in important areas like education, agriculture, health and industry.

Tagore attributed the widespread human suffering as the cause for the rise of Bolshevism but subsequently denounced the regime's use of violence, cruelty and repressive brutality. Its forced harmony was based on uncertain foundations. The contact between the leader and the followers was elusive and imperfect and a constant source of trouble. Added to this "the habit of passive following weakens the mind and character. Its very success defeats itself". In repudiating violence there is a similarity in the outlook between Tagore and Gandhi. Both distanced themselves from the Bolshevik practice mainly because of its glorification and practice of violence.

Tagore appreciated the fact that the Bolsheviks had ended many of the evil practices of the Czarist regime except one important practice, that of suppression of opinion and advised the Bolsheviks to end this evil. He was always against unquestioned allegiance, which was one of his criticisms of Gandhi's leadership in India. He, as a believer in the importance of freedom of mind, could easily see the dangers of suppression of dissidence and alternative points of view within the Soviet system. He was against the preaching of anger and class hatred, which the Soviets taught and that any good society must acknowledge the existence of difference of opinion through freedom of expression. His primary interest was with the new educational system and he was pleased with the vigour with which it spread throughout the Russian society. The achievement was not only numerical but also in its intensity creating a sense of self-respect. However, his insights did not miss its major defects as it turned the system into a mould whereas humanity is a living mind and that "either the mould will burst into pieces or man's mind will be paralysed to death or man will be turned into a mechanical doll". He looked to Bolshevism as a medical treatment for a sick society and could not conceive of it being a permanent feature of a civilised society. He commented "indeed the day on which the doctor's regime comes to an end must be hailed as a red letter day for the patient".

Tagore's account of the Soviet Union was a balanced one, which highlighted both the negative and positive aspects. In this respect he compared more favourably with H.G. Wells rather than with Sidney and Beatrice Webb who also visited the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The Webbs, unlike Wells, ignored the negative aspects of the Soviet society.

13.7 SUMMARY

Tagore was a pragmatic idealist and as Mulk Raj Anand wrote:

...a visionary who believed that in sentiment a multinational civilisation was the way through

which individuals and nations might surrender their power. He knew as an Indian, that in actual fact, several of the potentially freedom-loving nations were handicapped by the numerous aggressive nations built on greed and plunder. So he struggled against the imperialists of his day with a resilience that lends to his political thought a peculiar realism as well as a visionary quality (1967: 31).

He did not merely contemplate but tried to experiment and put his ideas in practice. Armed with courage of convictions he raised his voice against the cult of nationalism, about inequality among nations, imperialism including cultural imperialism and about lack of freedom in the colonial world where the majority lead deprived lives. He never lost hope in human rationality and thought as Plato did that education holds the key to human excellence and a better future. Amartya Sen aptly pointed out "Rabindranath insisted on open debate on every issue, and distrusted conclusions based on a mechanical formula, no matter how attractive that formula might seem in isolation.... The question he persistently asked it whether we have reason enough to want what is being proposed, taking everything into account. Important as history is, reasoning has to go beyond the past. It is in the sovereignty of reasoning- fearless reasoning in freedom- that we can find Rabindranath Tagore's lasting voice"

The mechanism of globalisation is a new device to perpetuate the spirit of domination and exploitation of the older imperial times rather than make an attempt to create a new partnership among nations and its people based on equality and shared prosperity. It is because of the perpetuation of an outmoded and short-sighted policy of the advanced countries that the philosophy of universal brotherhood has been relegated to a secondary status. The process of globalisation continues with what Tagore accused the West of demonstrating its strength but not its liberating power. Utiles and until this is rectified the West would continue to be held as suspect by nearly eighty percent of the people of the world. If peace and order are to be realised the humanistic side of the West has to come to the forefront. This would be possible only if the West sheds its narrow nationalistic concerns as stressed by Tagore. He hoped for the triumph of humanism, reason and science with the West showing the way. In the background of the two World Wars and the increasing realisation that for a continued peaceful evolution of the global village there is a need for a universal minimum in defining the good and the desirable and in mitigating the division between the privileged and the underprivileged, Tagore's critique could become the starting point of this rectification, and one which is long overdue.

13.8 EXERCISES

1. Discuss Rabindranath Tagore's idea of freedom and self realisation.
2. Explain Tagore's critique of nationalism.
3. Discuss and distinguish the basic disagreement between Tagore and Gandhi.
4. Evaluate Tagore's views on Bolshevism,